



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# REPORTING PARLIAMENT AND CONGRESS

BY P. W. WILSON

ACCORDING to the wisdom of those who speak English, it is best that we should be governed by persons whom we elect to Congresses and Parliaments from constituencies where dwell the voters. There arises the question, therefore, how we are to know from day to day what our representatives are doing in our name, and in England the answer to that question was for many centuries that there was no need for us, and no right, to know anything at all. Lords and Commons were "privileged"; in neither chamber was there a press gallery; to publish a debate or any part of it was a misdemeanor; and I have in my library original reports of alleged proceedings, two hundred years ago, in which the proper names of Queen Anne's great men are printed without vowels and so disguised. The theory was that the nation put itself under a Parliamentary trusteeship, that any publicity permitted by Parliament was a favor, and that while every citizen should know the law, no citizen could claim to know how the law was made.

With the development of newspapers, such privacy was bound to be swept away. Members themselves, being human, began to publish their speeches, and men like Dr. Johnson were employed to summarize and, if need be, to improvise each day's eloquence. When the present Houses of Parliament were designed by Sir Charles Barry, provision was made in both chambers for a Press Gallery, with ample writing rooms attached, and also dining rooms, while, of course, there are now all the paraphernalia of telephones, telegraphs and tickers. Unless typewriters have been introduced since I left, three years ago, they are still taboo. After all, in adopting improvements, England must draw the line somewhere!

Still, even to-day, there is the old sense that the pressman is a

highly honored interloper, whose ticket or passport must be signed and countersigned by the Lord Chamberlain and the Sergeant-at-Arms, and foreigners have been as rigidly debarred entrance to the gallery as they used to be from Japan. Some *tojin* scribes are, I believe, now admitted but there is not, even to-day, anything approaching the hospitable welcome that one receives, as a pressman, when one visits Congress. There, as it seems to me, one can walk anywhere, hear anything, see everything, talk to anybody. The chambers, which are designed for space and publicity rather than for tradition and mediaeval heraldry, belong to the people of the country who enter them as they enter any other part of their property. The architecture at the Capitol is familiar throughout the United States. You find it in public libraries, in post offices, in colleges. And visiting the Capitol, you do not feel as if you were being at last admitted, after generations of struggle, into the jealously guarded but, I must add, the charming and mysterious preserves of Hatfield House or Christchurch, Oxford.

At Washington, legislators are not so much trustees as mouth-pieces, instantly responsive to public opinion in the cities and towns whence they come. In neither House of Congress is there any "government" for legislators to "support" and no vote of Congress can change a government. To some extent therefore Congress appears to suffer in the press because its proceedings do not include the official statements of the Executive, which emanate from the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. In Britain, when Parliament is sitting, there is a strong demand that to Parliament first must Ministers unburden their souls of whatever good or evil they intend to do. On the other hand, there is at Washington a brisker trade than at Westminster in "specials" of speeches by Senators and Congressmen who wish thus to communicate of their activities to their friends and foes in the home State or city. In Parliament, it is against the rules to read a speech and nobody does this openly, except Ministers of the Crown, who are by nature inclined to regard themselves as superior to law-abiding mortals on back benches and have, in addition, a box (containing not "despatches" but Bibles for swearing upon) on which manuscripts may be laid. In the United States,

where each legislator has to keep a typist employed at the public expense, speeches are often written in advance, and sent to the press. This is the custom of all public men in America, and one is much impressed, when speaking at functions, by the fact that the reporter who "covers" the event seldom writes shorthand but edits the manuscript handed to him.

Although much of the business of the Commons is done under "closure," which means that many speeches are shut out, you are not allowed to have the suppressed oration printed at public expense in *Hansard*, which corresponds to the *Congressional Record*. To give members their due, they do not usually write their speeches out. The style of the speeches is conversational and grammar is often arranged in the Press Gallery. Also, we have no custom of members selecting their favorite editorial or other literary achievement and having it printed in the Official Reports. Quotations in speeches must be read at length if they are to be reproduced.

*Hansard* used to contain many speeches condensed into the third person. To be reported in the first person was a compliment; at any rate in the Commons. With peers, of course, the first person singular would be only proper, and peers talk so little, and that little so slowly, that their reporter, who sits in the middle of their House, where alone you can hear their secular lordships, has little difficulty with his highly responsible duties. Acoustics in the House of Lords are poor. Only Bishops, accustomed to cathedrals, are really comfortable in their intonations. Kings usually make themselves heard, partly because they have something to say and partly because their canopy acts as a sounding board. Kings' English has been for a hundred years exquisitely enunciated. Of late years, even Commoners are allowed "verbatim," and with the report available next morning there can be no corrections of syntax. Marks of applause, laughter and so on, with interruptions, are not inserted in the report, except when some subsequent remark depends on this byplay. For instance, when the House breaks up in disorder or—as happened in the fiery days before the war—an enthusiastic member throws a leather-bound book at Mr. Churchill, some record must be made, whatever the English used.

Except in *Hansard*, there is now no verbatim and hardly any "full" report of Parliament. One after another, newspapers have given up their special staffs of reporters and come to depend on agencies like the Associated Press or the Central News. These summaries have to suit people of all opinions and the tendency must be, therefore, to play for discretion. Where a mere fraction of what is said can alone be recorded, there is apt to be an uninteresting generalization. And, of course, men doing the work, by turns of half an hour or so, night after night, and constantly ignoring their own opinion on what is taking place, may become at times mechanical. In a sense, it is their duty so to be. One discovers, therefore, that a good many, but obscure, members "also spoke." But what they uttered is oblivion.

The fact is, of course, that we have not yet solved the problem of reporting either parliaments or public meetings. It is a task, if we could only realize it, involving the highest literary skill. Thucydides and Livy, and Caesar in his Commentaries, and the writers of the New Testament have all dealt with speeches and made them immortal. So much depends on the character and manner of the speaker. The most hopeful experiment in England was conducted by Sir Henry Lucy as "Toby, M. P." in *Punch*. His diaries of Parliament, published also as books, made Parliament live. Newly enfranchised voters became as familiar with Lords and Commons as they were with the boatraces or the Derby. Lucy's work gained much from association with the cartoonists of British politics—Sir Francis C. Gould, whose portraiture in pen and ink has been one of the most delicate achievements of its kind in the whole history of art, and Sir Harry Furniss, and Sir John Tenniel. From *Punch*, Sir Henry Lucy extended his idea of "a descriptive" to the *Daily News*, where he made great personalities live. His successor on that paper was H. W. Massingham, and I came third in the line. I am told that similar "descriptives" of Congress appear in the United States, but I must add that even in England, the descriptive has apparently fallen under the crushing weight of war. With woodpulp at famine prices, there was no room for criticism of Parliament as a drama or a game. And Parliament itself had ceased to be thus dramatic. It is no longer a place

where a few heroes contend—Greeks against Trojans—while the chorus applauds. Parliament is now an all-star cast and everybody talks. Also a variety of topics are included in each day's bill of fare. My own view has always been that a first class "descriptive" of Parliament is the first read and most read feature of any British daily paper. Such a "descriptive" of Congress would be, I believe, more read than some of the speculative material which now occupies much space in the American press. On the other hand, Britain is closer, geographically, to her Parliament than many American States are to Washington, D. C. There are no intervening provincial legislatures. I think that Parliament is more to us and that Congress will become, every decade, a bigger reality to Americans.

The idea that Congress should concern itself with discovering and expressing public opinion rather than directing it, extends to the editorials of newspapers here. In England, we always reckon to write "leaders" the same night, on whatever may have happened earlier in the day. If a speech is delivered in the evening, we "leader" that also, so that speech and comment appear simultaneously at breakfast. What we say may be wise or foolish but it is at least immediate and we have got in our word first. The more leisurely American editors—not that I here refer to news!—take the utterances of statesmen, like the rest of us, in the morning, meditate over them at lunch, and pronounce judgment next day. It is thus a judgment that sums up what the voice of the people, so far as it is articulate, has determined. It is an opinion, from without, upon the paper, as well as an opinion, from within, upon the public. The theory in England is still that exceptional men and women—some of whom are supposed to sit in the editorial sanctum—decide what is best for the rest of us. The theory in the United States is that the decision, even from day to day, is vested in the majority. That is why American policy seems sometimes to fluctuate. It is constantly adjusted to a prevailing sentiment. There is really a government of the people, by the people, for the people—at least, this is the instinct. One sees the most powerful Presidents sometimes overruled. The White House proposes but letters and tele-

grams from Arkansas and Ohio dispose. And these missives are addressed to Senators and Congressmen.

Neither Parliament, nor, I think, Congress has ever surrendered the right of secret debate. During the war, several such sessions were held at Westminster, the object being, of course, to prevent information reaching the enemy. Of these sessions, it has been said that nothing was uttered half so revealing to the enemy as the usual proceedings of Parliament; and as the Lords always insisted on hearing all that was told the Commons, the secrets were shared at once between thirteen hundred gentlemen and probably twice that number of wives and daughters, few if any of them blessed with the habitual discretion of us reporters. Nothing, however, was issued in writing, except a *précis*, signed by Mr. Speaker. Committees of Congress frequently sit in secret, which, perhaps, is inevitable, for the functions of these committees approximate to those of a Cabinet. Obviously, Foreign Affairs, the Navy, the Army, and Finance cannot be arranged across a table with every word and gesture told by watching scribes. Our committees are usually appointed to inquire into some innocent topic like the progress of vaccination. They are public and reporters would be very welcome, if only they would come. In the case of the Jameson Raid, there were certain telegrams between Cecil Rhodes and Hawksley, his agent in London. Those telegrams were shown to Joseph Chamberlain, who was then Colonial Secretary. They had a bearing obviously on the question whether Chamberlain did or did not know in advance of the plan for a raid. They were never produced and when the committee discussed them, it was behind closed doors.

At Westminster, Ministers of the Crown sit in Parliament and there make their announcements. By far the most interesting hour is the first in any sitting, when questions are asked and answered. Here you get, not argument, but facts or what ministerial veracity means by facts. In the old days, an inquiry on the cost of gum adhesive to postage stamps, would be answered by Gladstone, for the Treasury, impromptu, with suitable Latinity interspersed in the reply and an expression of gratitude to the Providence whereby postage stamps and especially, Sir, postage stamps that recall to us the royal lineaments of a virtuous

and noble-minded Queen, are rendered available for an ancient and loyal nation. Answers are now written by civil service clerks, read inaudibly by statesmen and sent up afterwards to the Press Gallery, where most of them are consigned to oblivion, or "history," as much the same thing. With the time for "questions" limited now to one hour, and with a growing thirst for information on all manner of subjects, important presumably to someone or other, time has to be saved and many answers are printed, without being read to the House. This, however, is the only case, so far as I know, of the official reports of the Houses going beyond the word actually spoken.

The fact that Executive Ministers do not sit in Congress and there submit themselves to daily cross-examination has led to a very interesting custom at Washington—namely, the daily interview between correspondents there and the departments and even the President himself. The candor and courtesy, the respectful yet easy atmosphere, maintained in those conferences are equally an honor to Cabinet Officers, as servants of the nation, and to the journalists as representing the unorganized public. Apparently, it is the rarest thing for a confidence to be betrayed. And—what is even more remarkable—no objection was raised, at any rate in my own case, when, as a person of foreign status, I asked if I might attend. I was made to feel quite at home. There is, of course, the rule that Cabinet Officers—and, of course, the President—must not be quoted textually. What they say is for guidance only. You thus have the press, keenly competitive within itself, entrusted with the most delicate task of preparing opinion, of suggesting policy, of removing prejudices. And the able correspondents who thus serve the national interest occupy a place in the American Constitution, the importance of which, perhaps, has yet to be fully recognized. It is evident that when the International Conference meets at Washington, their discretion and high sense of responsibility will be subjected to an even severer test.

Finally, we have the vital bearing of Parliamentary or Congressional journalism on the freedom of the press. In Britain, the law of libel is administered in a manner generally hostile to the newspapers. If a man says he is slandered, juries usually



agree that the benefit of the doubt should be given him and the newspaper, guilty or innocent, is penalized in costs or damages or both, as a warning not to slander anyone else. In the main, it makes the press careful, but, on the other hand, it is most difficult to get some abuses frankly exposed. But whatever is said in Parliament and—I take it—in Congress is privileged. It may be quoted without fear of legal consequences. And, in “the grand inquest of the nation,” therefore, we have as a great advantage this citadel where any evil may be denounced and the denunciation published broadcast—no Court being allowed to interfere with a legal process.

P. W. WILSON.